



## **When an Employee has an Addiction Problem**

### **Your role as manager or supervisor:**

- It is not to diagnose or counsel. In fact, it is unethical for someone in a relationship with power over another to engage in this type of help.
- Have a list of resources both within your organization and in the community to offer to the employee and let the employee know that you are not the best person to help them.
- Listening is not the same as counseling. Be open to having the employee explain their situation and their perspective, but resist offering advice about their personal life or their treatment.
- You are expected to work with them on solutions that allow them to be productive employees.
- You are not expected to solve their problems yourself. In fact, it is much more effective to have them come up with their own solutions and measurable goals. Their commitment to their own ideas will always be greater than their commitment to your ideas.
- You may need a lot of patience when helping an employee with addiction. Find the support you need so that you can manage this employee.
- Stay focused on the employee's performance objectives. Always stick to performance rather than discussions about character or personality. This is crucial to being an effective manager.

### **Adjust your thinking:**

- People with addiction problems are not weak, they are ill.
- Addiction is an illness, with symptoms that may be difficult to control (just the way someone with bronchitis may have an uncontrollable cough).
- The behaviors you see are symptoms of the illness. The person with addiction does not have the same clear choices about their addictive behavior as does someone without addiction.
- Denial and lying about the addictive behavior are symptoms of addiction.
- Consequences at work can provide the employee with meaningful incentive to work towards recovery.

- Addiction and mental illness often co-occur. Recovery for both is possible, and takes a lot of hard work. Relapse is also part of the illness and may occur at any time, but particularly when stressors increase.
- The addictive behavior may be an attempt to cover up feelings, thoughts and memories that are too painful to deal with. It may be an attempt to self-medicate to cope with the symptoms of mental illness.
- An old adage: it takes 29 times for help to be offered before a person with addiction can accept. You don't know where you are in that scheme, but your offer of assistance does register!

### What to do:

- Make sure your workplace has clearly written policies about the consequences of substance use while on the job and that all employees acknowledge an understanding of these policies.
- Document all behaviors related to workplace performance objectively. Resist writing down your suspicions or assumptions. Stick to the observable facts and the impact on performance.
- Have a discussion with the employee of consequences for behavior at work, and workplace performance issues.
- Remember that manipulative behavior, such as denial and lying, is part of the illness, and generally not intended to hurt or harm you or anyone else. If the lying or manipulative behavior does not relate directly to performance, don't engage in a debate about it.
- Write clearly-stated and measurable job expectations for your employee. Make sure the employee understands the expectations. You may need to explain the expectations more than once.
- Write a clearly-stated path of discipline. Make sure the employee understands the path. You may need to explain it more than once.
- Offer assistance every time you meet with the employee.
- Seek legal/personnel advice if the behaviors continue and you are considering dismissal.
- Think about workplace functions that may have alcohol present. Consider ways to have alcohol-free events to help meet the needs of your employee.

## How to engage with an employee who has an addiction problem:

- Stay firm to the employee's performance objectives. Always stick to performance rather than discussions about character or personality. This is crucial to being an effective manager.
- Understand that the issue is not about you or the employee's respect for you. It is a problem the employee has with substance and your need for a productive employee.
- Stay calm and resist lecturing or being defensive. Stick to the workplace issues and what you need and expect from the employee.
- Avoid using derogatory terms, such as pothead, stoner, alkie, wino, lush, junkie, etc. Use the term "person with substance issues".
- Try to see the person behind the addiction.
- Be sensitive to issues of alcohol use at workplace sponsored events or in the social fabric of the workplace community. For example, the focus of seasonal parties in December is often alcohol. Downplay or eliminate alcohol at these events. Going for a drink after work may be difficult for the employee with alcohol addiction. If this is a regular social practice at your workplace, consider alternate activities.

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